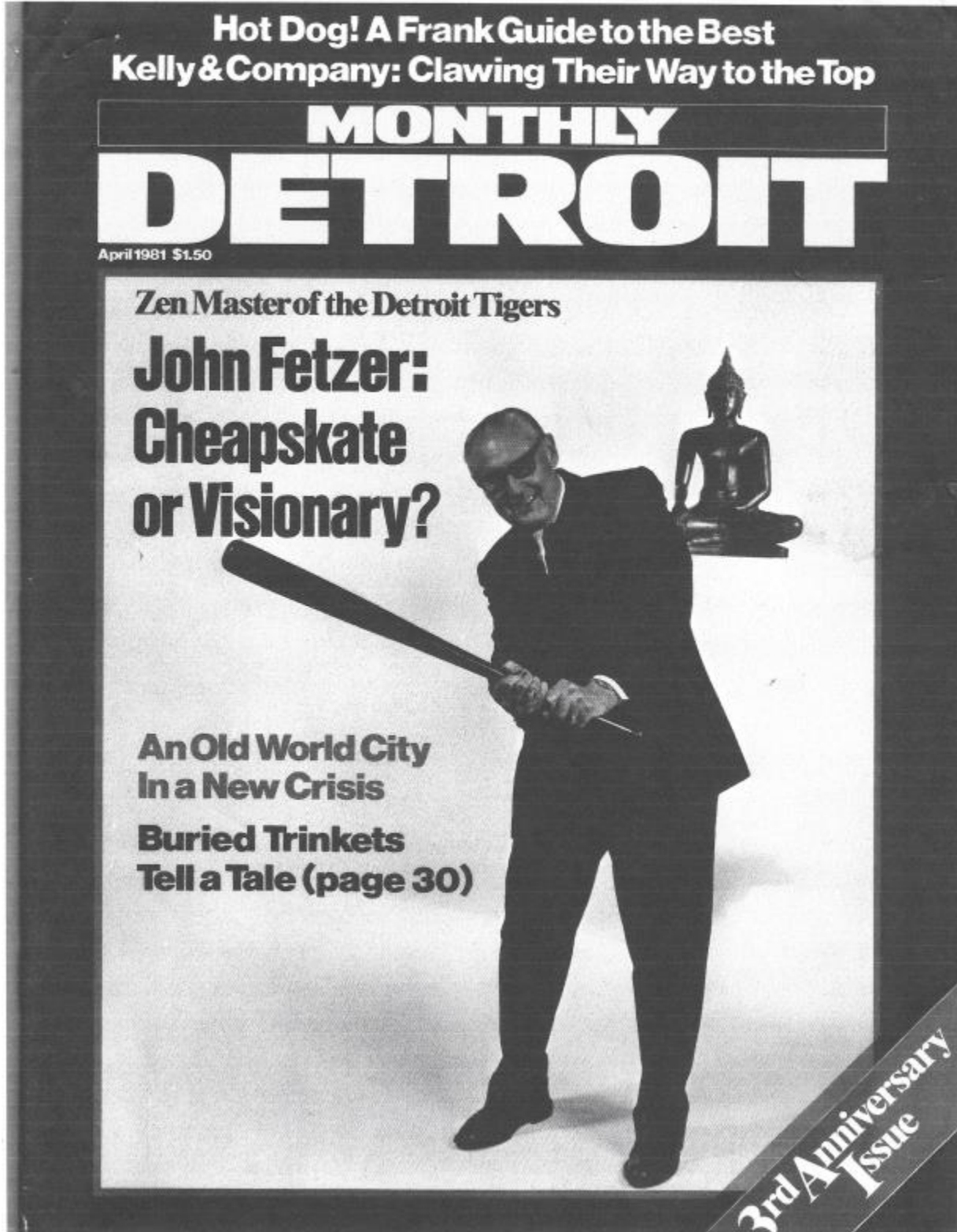


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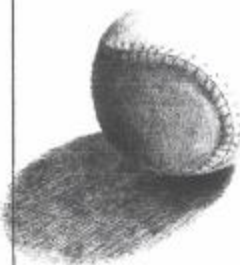


THE MAN WHO OWNS
THE BUDDHA ALSO OWNS THE
BASEBALL TEAM.

ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE OLDEST TIGER

BY NANCY KOOL

HE IS EQUALLY
*conversant with karma
and Kemp, with flyballs
and UFOs, with
broadcasting and ESP.
Yet to the fans who
know his name, John
Fetzer's just a
cheapskate.*



IN A WASHROOM ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF TOKYO STANDS A SEVENTY-ONE-YEAR-OLD BROADCASTING EXECUTIVE FROM THE AMERICAN Midwest who has come to Japan as a special negotiator for the United States State Department.

Beside him is the head of the Japanese delegation — a diplomat whose sharp eyes, only moments before, had discovered an unanticipated phrase in the final version of a television-programming exchange treaty between their two countries, the work of two weeks of intensive negotiations. The Japanese had quarreled with the phrase, which, they said, was not at all what their delegation had agreed to. Though the signing ceremony had begun, they angrily refused to continue. A recess was called.

"It's all a matter of enlightenment," the American now offers philosophically, to suggest that the disagreement will soon clear itself up.

"Do you know of Zen?" demands the Japanese diplomat, surprised to hear such talk from a source as unlikely as an aging American businessman.

"Well, yes, a little," answers the other modestly, though he has made a ten-year study of the subject. "That's a quote of the Enlightened One."

At the sound of the Buddha's name, the Japanese is convinced. He seizes this chance to discuss philosophy with the visitor, and the two spend the rest of the recess absorbed in Zen and comparisons to its Western counterparts. The disputed treaty, which lies awaiting their signatures, is forgotten.

The old American returns to his seat. As the session is called back to order, it is his turn to be surprised.

"I will have you know that Mr. Fetzer and I have just had an extended discussion about the treaty," the head of the host delegation announces. "We will now proceed with the signing."

Nine years later, the old businessman, now a month shy of eighty, tells this story with amusement that grows into gentle laughter at the punch line. From over the shoulder of this self-made multimillionaire, one of the most powerful members of baseball's establishment, beams a solid bronze Buddha. The statue, nearly three feet high, is a rare and valuable Indian antique acquired from a museum. John Fetzer finishes his anecdote with a wave at the statue: "So that's why I have little things like that around. They remind you now and then of the serenity that's necessary when everything falls apart, as it does at least once a day, every day of your life." And then he smiles, as peacefully as the ancient statue behind him.

THIS IS THE MAN BASEBALL writers call "good, gray John." And in fact John Fetzer

is perhaps the grayest of the *éminences grises*. The man who owns the Buddha also owns the Detroit Tigers, and this month, for the twenty-fifth consecutive Opening Day, Fetzer will watch his team step up to the plate in Tiger Stadium. But in an era when owning a ball club is a quick route to celebrity, he has purposefully remained in the shadows. Let George Steinbrenner make beer commercials, let Ted Turner don a Braves uniform and bench his manager; Fetzer seeks no headlines. The Tigers' president and general manager, Jim Campbell, confers with Fetzer almost daily. But compared to a Turner or a Steinbrenner, the Tigers' proprietor preserves the detached aura of a sage observing from the height of the mountaintop. And to the fans, he is just as mysterious.

If they know him at all, it is as the small-town Scrooge, the crass purveyor of mediocre ball teams, the skinflint who has reduced the national sport to a matter of profit and loss, bent on wringing the last buck out of the perennially forgiving Detroit fan. Or they know him as the elderly anachronism who can't wake up to the fact that baseball today is show biz — that you have to spend big money on free-agent athletes to build a contender and make more money.

Fetzer, who always makes money with the ball club, feels hurt by his public image. But he doesn't bother to try to improve it — he is too busy, and too private an individual. Besides, he believes he is acting out of principle. Others may scoff, but Fetzer believes the million-dollar salaries paid to free-agent ball players have endangered the future of the national sport.

Those who say they know Fetzer will tell you that he never did anything in his life just to make a buck, though he has made at least \$100 million in his lifetime. They also say that in his remarkable career, he has been nothing less than visionary.

Besides the ring of the cash register, the oldest Tiger has listened to the figurative voices of his intuition during his long career. His story mingles the clicks of a telegraph key with the sounds of Muzak, of mantras and transmissions from outer space with the silence of meditation.

From his first radio experiments to the parapsychological research he has funded since Eisenhower was in the White House, the Kalamazoo resident has always seemed a step ahead of his time.

For the moment, Michigan and Trumbull inspires a lot of catcalls over fifth-place finishes and hoarse demands, shouted from the bleachers, that Fetzer spend some cash on big-name players.

Fetzer, of course, refuses. He could be wrong about this one; a lot of people think he is. But *Detroit News* sports editor Joe Falls thinks Fetzer's lonely stand on free agency will someday be vindicated, and that the oldest Tiger is much misunderstood by people who call him a cheapskate.

"But it's hard to have vision, you know," Falls adds, with a twinge of regret and a tinge of realism.

JOHN EARL FETZER was born in the early morning of this century, on March 25, 1901, in the small Indiana town of Decatur. His father, a mechanical engineer, died suddenly of pneumonia when the boy was two. Curiosity about the father he never knew would later lead Fetzer to spend thirty years researching his parents' genealogies, traveling hundreds of miles of backroads in Ohio, Germany and the mountains of Switzerland. As a boy, Fetzer remembers that the family, following his mother's search for work as a milliner, moved often. He also remembers his mother's unobtrusive but persistent spiritual streak, a quality that left its imprint on her son's personality.

"Her religious instincts were not pious to the extent that a lot of the women at that time were," Fetzer recalls of his mother, the former Della Winger. "She never made a fetish out of her spirituality. But as far as the family went, that was all-important to her."

In later years, the devoted, almost fervently maternal woman would express the hope that her son, though pursuing worldly success, would lead "an affirmatively spiritual life." She warned him that "possessions can blight a life." Her son remembers the last words she spoke to him, as she lay dying at the age of eighty-seven: "Pray, John, pray."

A GATHERING OF neighbors crowded into a small living room in Lafayette, Indiana, one summer night in 1911. They had come to witness the miracle of wireless. Their host, Fred Ribble, a telegrapher for the Wabash Railroad, had built a crude antenna and strung it between the flagpole in the front yard and a big oak tree across the street. Now Ribble was busying himself with fine-tuning his crystal set and making the last check of the headphone connection, so his neighbors could hear the broadcast all the way from Arlington, Virginia. At five minutes to nine, it began: a series of audible "dots," one per second. The headphones were passed around that quiet, charged room, each man and woman listening. "Yes, I can hear it," "Yes, I can hear it," circled the room just behind the home-made headset. At precisely nine o'clock,

EARLY DAYS OF THE EMPIRE



STILL IN HIS TEENS, Fetzer poses beside his ham radio station, which later formed the core of his first commercial station in Berrien Springs (top left). The first WKZO studio, in downtown Kalamazoo, grew into the flagship of Fetzer's broadcasting interests (top right). While still broadcasting in Berrien Springs, the twenty-four-year-old sat for a studio portrait with one of the day's crude microphones (far right). The local newspaper marked Fetzer's seventh year in Kalamazoo and the dedication of WKZO's new transmitter in 1938 (bottom left). Fetzer and Carl Lee shake hands at the inauguration of his first television station when WKZO-TV went on the air in 1950. Six years later, Lee would persuade his boss to enter the bidding for the Detroit Tigers (bottom right).

the transmission concluded with a slightly more sustained noise, a "dash." By now, the men had their watches out, ready to set them, when Ribble, at the instant of the last signal, lowered his raised arm. Ten-year-old John Fetzer, who would grow up to make a fortune in radio and television, watched it all.

If Della Winger Fetzer shaped her son's inner life, Ribble, his brother-in-law and surrogate father, sparked the boy's interest in the mysterious new medium that became his career. Ribble, who had married Fetzer's older half-sister, Harriet, was a devoted tinkerer. As soon as he could build or send away for the latest advance in the crude communications devices of the day, he did.

When John was nine, Ribble gave him his first telegraph sounder (a souvenir Fetzer still keeps in his office) and taught him Morse code. Down at the depot, the man was also the boy's link to the Detroit Tigers, which had a following at that end of the Wabash. If a big game was underway, a crowd would form outside the depot house and wait for Ribble to chalk up the latest score, transmitted over the wires, on a big blackboard outside.

By his early teens, the boy was experimenting and building equipment on his own. When the World War I moratorium on transmitting made it unwise to erect an antenna outside the family's latest home, in West Lafayette, Indiana, the boy used his bedsprings as an antenna and sent dots and dashes across town to a schoolchum. At eighteen, he entered Purdue University's engineering school, a hotbed of developmental research in wireless telephony. What attracted Fetzer were the limitless possibilities of the untried, uncharted ground. "There was a very keen sense of investigation at Purdue," he recalls, "a great pioneering effort to know."

Fetzer built his first ham station while at Purdue. Soon after, he contacted Dr. Frank Conrad, a Pittsburgh radio experimenter, and the pair began regular radio conversations. They discovered they had an audience — people living between the two cities were listening in with crystal sets or the more sophisticated audiotrons. During one conversation, Conrad pulled his phonograph up to the microphone, played a record, and created a small sensation. Conrad's station became KDKA, (which, along with Detroit's WWJ, claims the first formal broadcast, during the Harding election in 1920). Fetzer's station became Lafayette's WLK.

After two-and-a-half years, Fetzer left Purdue, got a job as parts manager for an electrical supplier, and began building stations and consulting in the region, working in cities like Chicago and Indianapolis. In 1923, he was asked to build a station in Berrien Springs for a small school called Emmanuel College (now Andrews University). Working in ex-

**CUTTING
through the
night skies,
the RAF
bomber pilots
were witnessing
something
strange.**

change for tuition so he could finish his degree, he brought his ham station up to Michigan, built some equipment and bought more from WLK. The little non-commercial station thrived briefly with a program of lectures and music. But the college soon discovered it couldn't afford the project and decided to find a buyer. With no capital, Fetzer whittled the asking price from \$10,000 to \$2,500, to be paid over the next few years, and set up shop on the edge of campus. For a year he scoured nearby communities for advertising, hurried back to write copy, read it over the air, spun the records and served as technician and engineer. But in 1925, with a congressional debate over control of the airwaves brewing, Fetzer left for Europe to study firsthand the state-run broadcasting systems of England, Holland, Germany, Switzerland and France. He returned convinced that a secure free press depended on radio remaining in private hands. This position prevailed when, along with 150 educators, bureaucrats and enterprising young men like himself, Fetzer attended Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover's 1927 radio conference in Washington.

When the Depression struck, Fetzer's station was still struggling. He began looking for another city where the frequency would work. He found Kalamazoo and, with just his equipment and \$156 in working capital, went on the air in 1930 with a 500-watt daytime station, WKZO. Kalamazoo's merchants, however, were unresponsive to the idea of radio advertising. In the midst of the Depression, Fetzer traded meal tickets and groceries for air time. But, slowly, the station overcame the resistance and began to flourish.

It was the effort to expand to a full-time broadcasting schedule that led Fetzer into a seven-year landmark legal battle over the use of a newly developed antenna — and brought him to Washington, where he was to play a role, on and off, for the next forty years.

Fetzer and another engineer, Tam Craven of Washington, had together conceived and developed a directional antenna which, they argued, would allow stations on the same frequency to broadcast after sunset without interfering with one another. But an Omaha station which shared WKZO's frequency challenged Fetzer's use of the new device, and it was not until 1938, after the case had twice reached the Supreme Court, that the Senate ordered the Federal Communications Commission to issue Fetzer the first experimental license to use the antenna. WKZO was the first of 3,000 stations ultimately licensed under the ruling.

Fetzer had been his own best lobbyist during that fight, tirelessly walking the government bureaus and the corridors of Capitol Hill. And he had made friends. When World War II came, he was Roosevelt's appointee as U.S. Censor for Radio, monitoring domestic and overseas shortwave transmissions and setting up the voluntary guidelines for what could be broadcast. The emphasis on self-regulation was Fetzer's legacy from those early battles against public control of the airwaves. And it was that distrust of government control which led Fetzer and the office's director, Byron Price, to ask Congress for a drastic budget cut. As soon as it became clear that the U.S. was winning the war, the two men began planning the gradual dismantling of their office from its peak staffing of 15,000 and its annual budget of \$35 million. By the war's end, with just 500 employees left, the office's records were stuffed in barrels and stored in the basement of the National Archives building. Had they not disbanded it, Fetzer believes, there might still be a censorship office today. "It would be the biggest bureau in town — and its whole thrust would be to control the press and radio and television," he vows. As it turned out, the office was scuttled just a step before the McCarthy era began, with its intense pressure for government censorship of everything from movies to news.

The postwar years would see Fetzer shuttling on government missions abroad or working for the broadcast industry in Washington. Before the shooting stopped, he joined a group of American broadcasters who, at Eisenhower's request, oversaw the rehabilitation of European radio. (When the Russians rolled into Berlin and snapped up the remnants of that city's broadcasting system, Fetzer followed a furious Ike and the 82nd Airborne into the German capital.) Later, as

chairman of the National Association of Broadcasters' Television Code Review Board from 1952-55, he authored the television code of ethics and supervised the industry's program of self-regulation, this time for the television stations that were cropping up around the country — including his own WKZO-TV, which went on the air in 1950.

The years as censor had done more than secure his role in the formulation of national broadcast policy. It gave the Midwestern engineer-turned-businessman-turned-bureaucrat his first glimpse of that baffling phenomenon which was to grip his mind and engage his curiosity for the next forty years.

CUTTING THROUGH
the night skies above the River Rhine, the RAF bomber pilots were witnessing something unlike anything anybody had ever heard of, much less seen. Whirling discs of light, from six to thirty feet across, were pacing the bulky Lancaster bombers, remaining a fixed distance behind them, now and then wheeling to fly circles around the bewildered airmen. Could this, Churchill wondered, be Hitler's rumored "secret weapon"?

The top-secret communiqué from the British prime minister to the White House found its way across the desk of the U.S. Censor for Radio. John Fetzer took note of it. Soon, American pilots were reporting similar sightings of the strange craft. And while the Allied command waited anxiously for one of these flying objects to strike, word came from intelligence sources behind the lines: Nazi fliers were returning from missions over London with stories of the same phenomenon. Eventually, U.S. Navy photographers recorded the bright circular blurs on film. These flying objects were never identified, Fetzer notes, concluding his wartime anecdote. And ever since the war years, Fetzer has collected and compared accounts from the thousands of unexplained sightings of UFOs, and of mysterious radio signals received from space.

But the intriguing, beguiling possibility of visitors from outer space has never caused Fetzer to neglect his earthly empire. WJEF in Grand Rapids, since sold, was added in 1945. In 1951, WJFM went on the air in Grand Rapids (it would later become the country's most powerful FM station). During the Fifties, Fetzer also acquired the Cornhusker Television Corporation and KOLN-TV, in Lincoln, Nebraska; became the chairman of the board of WMBD in Peoria; secured the outstate Michigan Muzak franchise and added a Cadillac, Michigan, television station, recently sold. The Sixties saw him branching out into such diverse holdings as Arizona real estate and oil wells in

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Illinois, and the additions of KGIN-TV, in Grand Island, Nebraska, and WWUP-TV (which was later sold) in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. He also formed Fetzer Cablevision, and acquired WWAM radio in Cadillac and Medallion Broadcasters, Incorporated (KMEG-TV), in Sioux City, Iowa. His Michigan stations have broadcast the Tiger games since Fetzer helped organize the statewide Tiger radio and television networks. It was to keep from losing the lucrative broadcast rights after W.O. Briggs' death in 1952 that Fetzer decided to enter the bidding for the club.

The idea was suggested to Fetzer by his right-hand man, Carl Lee, second in command at Fetzer Broadcasting. Fetzer wasn't interested at first, but he changed his mind and organized an eleven-man syndicate, one of eight groups bidding.

The favorite and best known was headed by baseball's pitchman, Bill Veeck. Veeck, former Chicago White Sox owner, is best known in recent times as the man who staged last summer's "Anti-Disco Night" at Comiskey Park. It was a promotion that backfired into a riot. (The visiting club, the Detroit Tigers, was pulled off the torn-up field after Jim Campbell conferred with Fetzer by phone. The Tigers were later awarded a victory by forfeit.)

Bidding for the Tigers, Veeck promised to liven up staid Briggs Stadium and kept his name and his plans in the headlines. "He was holding a press conference every hour on the hour," Fetzer tells the story. But Veeck held one press conference too many.

When Fetzer read that the National Bank of Detroit had promised Veeck a \$2.5-million line of credit, the unknown

broadcast executive guessed that Veeck's bid must be at least twice that, or \$5 million — the most ever paid for a ball club at that time. Fetzer returned to his syndicate and persuaded the investors to up their ante from the \$4.8 million they had raised. When the sealed bids were opened in late 1956, Veeck's bid of \$5.3 million came in second. The graying Kalamazoo man, part of the syndicate that had offered \$5.5 million, was one-third owner of the team he had rooted for at the end of the old Wabash line.

Impatient with committee rule, Fetzer gradually bought up the remaining two-thirds and became one of baseball's few sole owners in 1962. He immediately announced plans to upgrade the Tigers' farm system. By 1968 — nine years before the free-agent draft began in earnest — he had poured an estimated \$7 million into the farm clubs, and Detroit had its first World Champion baseball team since 1945.

The 1968 World Champions were the highest paid team in the history of the Detroit franchise. In 1972, the year they took their division, they were the best compensated team in the American League. "Back in the days when everyone was cheap," quips one Detroit sportswriter, "the Tigers were generous." The 1981 Tigers, a young and undistinguished team, will also draw more pay than any of their predecessors. That will certainly lift the club payroll from its embarrassing 1980 rank of twenty-first among twenty-six major league teams. Fetzer can refuse to take part in the free-agent draft, but he can't escape its consequence — the major-league salaries that have quadrupled since the draft began. Thus, with an arbitrator's decision, slugging Tiger left fielder, Steve Kemp, garnered \$600,000 for this season. And the young slugger for a team with a reputation for low payrolls, became the highest paid athlete ever to wear a Detroit uniform.

AS USUAL, THE GRAY-haired owner of the Detroit Tigers sat silently and listened as the debate wound itself up and then down, letting the others make their points, raising their voices or banging the table to illustrate them. When the vote was counted at that meeting of the American League in 1975, he was in the minority: It was 8-3, with one abstention. That might have been the end of the matter. But as legend goes, John Fetzer slowly stood up and paused. It was the others' turn to listen.

"Gentlemen," Fetzer addressed his peers. "This man has called me a son of a bitch repeatedly, and I don't like being called a son of a bitch any more than the rest of you do. But gentlemen, we gave this man our word that if he would do

ON THE NATIONAL SPORT:

Baseball probably expresses the American character as well as anything you could name. . . . I think when you look at the stresses and strains that the average fellow is under — and he can go to the ball park, and he can give vent to all of the pent-up inhibitions. He may want to tell the opposition player off, he may want to tell the umpire off. But that is giving him the opportunity to tell somebody what he would rather have said to his boss that morning, but didn't dare say. So it gives vent to the fans' frustrations. . . . From just the standpoint of abject psychiatry, I think that's probably serving a very useful purpose on the American scene. . . .

Now if I have to classify levels of idealism, I have to put baseball on a higher plane than football. Not that there's anything wrong with football, because I'm an avid football fan. But football appeals to more of the killer instinct. It's like going to a bullfight. I think a bullfighter ought to be a very excellent football fan.

ON FREE AGENCY: I think it's here to stay. I don't think there's any way to change it. Because it's now a *fait accompli*. But I do think that the bidding contest for the services of ball players ought to have some sanity in it. What ball player is worth \$25 million? I don't blame the ball players; the owners have given away the store.

ON TICKET PRICES: A lot of fans are very willing to spend somebody else's money, but just the minute the ticket prices go up at the counter, you could see them holler like O'Harry. Because the biggest danger of going into the free agent market is . . . [when] you get your ticket prices so high that fans say, "Hey, this has gone far enough. We can't afford this any longer." . . . And baseball's about the only professional sport that's left that's still a family sport, because they can still afford the tickets.

ON MULTIYEAR FREE-AGENT CONTRACTS: What will happen with the [league] leader that's loaded down with this high-priced talent, all these fellows that are the senior citizens of baseball, so to speak? One of these days, he's going to be loaded down with all these tired old ball players on his hands. And he's going to be expected to

certain things, we would approve his purchase of the ball club. He did all that we asked, and now baseball can't go back on its word."

Fetzer sat down. Another vote was called for, and this time the outcome was reversed: Bill Veeck, the man who had called John Fetzer an SOB, was back in baseball at Fetzer's behest.

FETZER ON MONEY & BASEBALL

BASEBALL
*is good psychiatry . . .
the team owners have
given away the store . . .
George Steinbrenner
has hurt baseball . . .
and greed threatens the
national game.*



keep right on going out and buying new ones, and he's going to have that payroll and all these other guys still waiting around (saying) "Gimme, gimme, gimme. . . ."

ON WHAT THREATENS BASEBALL: Greed, greed, just plain abject greed.

ON STYLES OF OWNERSHIP: I do not seek headlines as a lot of my peers in baseball do. They're headline hunters, so to speak. A lot of them, they're in baseball for the ego ride. . . . I can think of some owners who spend ninety percent of their time being a happy-fellow-well-met with all the citizens up and down the streets. They're always in the news or the society columns; they're in all the clubs in town; they're always extending favors to their friends. I wouldn't say that's necessarily wrong. I am just too busy about my job to do such things. As a result I can't possibly be a popular man up and down the avenues of the town.

ON GEORGE STEINBRENNER: Take a person like George Steinbrenner. George Steinbrenner has got his own personality to live with. He has to be George Steinbrenner, just as I have to be John Fetzer. . . . There is no

"He speaks with a soft voice, but when he does speak, they listen," Chicago *Sun-Times* sportswriter Jerome Holtzman says, describing Fetzer's quiet power. Holtzman, the dean of American baseball writers, calls the Tiger owner "easily the most powerful man in the American League" almost since his advent. "And for the last twenty years, he has been a

way we would ever see things alike to that extent. But he's just as entitled to his viewpoint as I am to mine. . . . He'll pay anything through the nose to win; that's his style. It's hurt a lot of people in baseball. It's hurt baseball as an institution. But I'm sure George would disagree with that.

ON BASEBALL WRITERS: Their level of thinking is actually confined to the sport they cover. I think a lot of the times when they try to write in other fields — around sports — then you can see what little they actually do know. But we have good ones, and we have bad ones.

ON MONEY AND MORALE: I think money has destroyed morale on more ball clubs than any other single thing. . . . If we hadn't had all of this fussing and feuding over money, we could have had a winner by now. We have good talent come up from the farm systems. . . . [but] they're distracted over money. They're worried. They're talking to their agents all the time — "What should I get?" — and the player becomes an individual. He's no longer a team player. Because all I, as a player, have to worry about is my stats. . . . Don't tell me I ought to lay down a sacrifice when I can hit a home run. A home run means money in my pocket.

ON BEING CALLED CHEAP: I'm human — I sense the injustice of it as much as anybody. We're not cheap in any sense of the word. We run one of the best-class organizations in baseball. Talk to anybody else in baseball. Talk to anybody you want to.

ON MONEY, PERIOD: Money is not an end in itself. It's been amply shown that money does not bring happiness. And money cannot be a clock of what a person is actually worth. If it is, then I think you're on the wrong track. Anybody that has possessions, anybody who is very honest, will say "I don't own anything — my possessions all own me."

ON THE 1981 TIGERS: The operation of a ball club is slot machine. You have to have a lot of luck — lots of luck. If we have good luck we could make a *surprising* showing. Because we have these young pitchers and even if a couple of them hit their stride this year, we could be very, very damaging in the Eastern race before it's over.

really dominant force in baseball — and nobody knows about it."

Veeck, who has bounced around both leagues, had managed to nettle baseball's establishment. And there are few owners who have symbolized baseball's establishment any more than Fetzer. Fetzer will tell you that he doesn't think Veeck has been very good for the game. But the



FETZER LOOKS UP from the whirlpool in St. Louis at left-hander Mickey Lolich (29), whose third 1968 series win made the Tigers world champions.

vote was a matter of principle: Veeck had fulfilled all of the conditions the league set for his repurchase of the White Sox. Fetzer's principled, impersonal stand earned him the reputation as "baseball's conscience."

Holtzman suspects that in the last two or three years Fetzer's influence has waned a little as he has become less active. Even so, Holtzman suggests, there is no single owner who today wields the power that Fetzer held for two decades.

Fetzer had proved his mettle as a newcomer in the league. "He was the granddaddy of Monday night sports," baseball commissioner Bowie Kuhn says. In 1962, Fetzer sold his peers on their first national network television package, in which every club had an equal share of the pot from a network "game of the week." Fetzer not only engineered the first agreement, he peddled it, paying calls on Madison Avenue as he had lobbied on the Hill thirty years before. The current four-year package is worth \$90 million to baseball.

A few years ago, Charlie Finley, the flamboyant, irascible owner of the Oak-

land A's, was lining up the sale of three of his club's best players. As Holtzman tells the story, Charlie O got greedy and reneged on a gentleman's agreement to let the Tigers have pitching ace Vida Blue for \$1 million. Bowie Kuhn later voided the sale of Blue and two other players. Had Finley honored the deal with Fetzer, instead of trying to peddle Blue to the Yankees for \$1.5 million, Holtzman believes, Kuhn would not have interfered.

"He wouldn't have wanted to cross Mr. Fetzer," Holtzman says. "I don't know how much more powerful you can get."

IN HIS LARGE, DARK-paneled office inside WKZO's Broadcast House in Kalamazoo, John Fetzer is at home.

At Tiger Stadium, the owner watches the occasional home game from his private box on the right-field line, protected from ogles by the one-way glass. John Hiller, the longtime Tiger bull pen mainstay, remembers Fetzer mainly as a shadowy presence during his twelve years on the team: "We would get a glimpse of

him going into the stands at the start of spring training. . . ."

Here at WKZO, however, Fetzer is relaxed and cordial, breaking up his usual fourteen-hour workday to tell the stories of his long career: the Early Days of Radio; the Washington Years; How He Came to Buy His Ball Club. He displays mild impatience only with the bulk of the material, more often than not ending a chapter with "But that story goes on and on," as if amused and slightly embarrassed that he has lived so long and done so much. If he ever takes the time to write his third book, his autobiography, he will have to call it *The Nine Lives of John Fetzer*, he says, smiling at another old joke.

At 6'1", Fetzer's large, broad-shouldered frame is spare and trim from the forty-five minutes of exercises he does every morning. For twenty minutes, he rides a computerized bicycle that measures pulse and certain other metabolic functions. Now he sits comfortably sideways at his desk, slightly slouched but not stooped, in almost Oriental calm and self-containment. His face has grown a little

jowly in the last decade, and his hair has thinned, but it is still mostly gray. When he talks about the things that interest him — the placement and movement of television cameras in a ball park, a bang-bang double play — his eyes flash behind his glasses, and he makes rapid shifts in his seat. He seems then not eighty years old, but one of those creative men who goes on and on — with hardly a sidelong glance at age.

Fetzer is often the last to leave this building for his unspectacular Tudor home, where the only servants are two regular housekeepers and an occasional nurse for his ailing wife of fifty-four years, Rhea, whose health has been poor since a heart attack two years ago. "He doesn't have any sons or daughters," one WKZO employee says thoughtfully; the people who work for Fetzer are his family, the man suggests, "... and he doesn't want to walk off into the sunset and leave them stranded."

Fetzer rarely loses his temper with the people who work for him, any more than he raises his voice in baseball's councils. "I don't," he says quietly, with a characteristic blend of pragmatism and philosophy, "because I don't think that pays dividends." Nor is he, even here, a boisterous glad-hander, the kind who is comfortable in front of a television camera. Fetzer doesn't even like to have his picture taken. That shyness, that reserve, he thinks, is why he is considered aloof by the fans and the press — "Because there are so many people in baseball that consistently make clowns of themselves. I would never want to undertake to be a comedian or a clown. I would rather leave that up to the people we hire to do that ... the 'midgets on the field.'"

He is the kind of man that almost everybody calls "Mister." Jim Campbell does, and so does George Kell, the down-home, honey-drawled Tiger television announcer. Fetzer doesn't demand it, and he seems puzzled and a little embarrassed when asked about it.

WKZO, Kalamazoo's AM radio station, and WKZO-TV, encompassing metropolitan Grand Rapids as well, form the flagship of his empire. Here he began, and here are the men who know him best. Here also are some clues to the operation of the Detroit Tigers.

The same chain of command observed at Tiger Stadium, where Fetzer talks to Campbell and Campbell talks to manager Sparky Anderson, is evident here. (Aside from special celebrations, Campbell has visited the clubhouse, the manager's domain, just three times in eighteen years — each time to announce a sudden death or serious illness.)

"He tries to surround himself with people who understand his viewpoints," explains Fetzer Broadcasting President, Carl Lee. "The latitude that he will give me, for instance, is almost scary. He lays

HE IS
the small town
Scrooge, bent
on wringing the
last buck out of
the perennially
forgiving Detroit
sports fan.

the groundwork, and you do it."

Like Fetzer, like the Tiger uniforms and the rare, low-key promotions at the stadium, WKZO has all the appearances of conservatism. The TV station still broadcasts just thirty minutes of concentrated evening local news, with no chit-chat and no cute features. But like its owner, this company has a history of success with ventures — cablevision in the Sixties, for instance — considered poor risks at the time.

And like Tiger Stadium, this is a profitable enterprise.

"Mr. Fetzer isn't in baseball to make money," Jim Campbell declares. "But you can bet your butt he isn't in it to lose money and wreck the franchise, either." The Tigers have long been one of the most solvent clubs in either league. At WKZO, they'll tell you that the worthy motive of making money is just one of their many worthy motives. WKZO sticks with fifteen-minute morning news broadcasts, "because we don't have a morning newspaper in Kalamazoo, and people depend on us." The station broadcasts an average two hours weekly of city commission meetings with no commercials. WKZO-TV was among the CBS affiliates that refused to drop *Captain Kangaroo* even when its ratings sagged. The people at WKZO are what used to be called good citizens, honest and straight, and they are proud of it.

So are they all honorable men at Tiger Stadium, even the harshest critic will allow. But some think that's what's wrong with the ball club. "They're gray flannel," Jerry Green of *The Detroit News* observes. "I wish they would be a little less gray flannel and a little more pin-striped."

In this, both companies take a cue from their dignified owner.

Carl Lee is Fetzer's closest friend and confidant. He persuaded his boss to buy the ball club, he socializes with him, and he has traveled to Europe on Fetzer's genealogical researches. He has worked for him for forty-one years.

"My daughter calls him Uncle John," Lee says with a smile. "I call him Mr. Fetzer."

EDGAR MITCHELL, one of the astronauts who traveled to the moon, calls John Fetzer a "fellow traveler."

When Mitchell, a NASA-trained engineer, first set foot on the surface of the moon and beheld the earth, something unexpected happened: There, dangling out in space, he later said, he felt flooded with "the universal consciousness and overwhelmed with the meaning of life and the sacredness of all existence." The former astronaut later founded the Institute for Noetic Science (from *noos*, the Greek word for mind), dedicated to the exploration of "inner space." And he invited the owner of the Detroit Tigers to join his board of directors.

Mitchell first heard of Fetzer when the Kalamazoo man wrote him a letter. The two men corresponded for a couple of years before they finally met in Detroit, where they saw a Tiger game together. Sharing an equal interest in both science and human spirituality, the two engineers became friends.

"John's a real seeker," Mitchell describes his director emeritus. The astronaut was impressed by the tycoon who had built his success on the twin pillars of hard work and intuition, a faculty that Fetzer compares to "learning to listen to the right sort of voices — not that I hear voices. It's kind of an upbeat [feeling] that a certain approach to a thing just seems to be right."

Psychic (Fetzer prefers the term "metaphysical") research has come out of the closet in recent years. But Fetzer, whose money is keeping projects in telepathy and biofeedback underway at Princeton, Duke and the Universities of California and Virginia, entered this realm in the late Fifties, "long before it was a street subject." By his own loose estimate, he has given away millions through his Detroit-based John E. Fetzer Foundation.

Even today, he concedes, there are those who think these interests eccentric. He doesn't seem troubled by that fact. He is a practical man. He believes that this research will show science how to tap man's unknown powers and apply them to concrete problems — "to capitalize on the potential of the mind," as this eighty-year-old capitalist puts it.

"He has put a great deal of money into

some very noble projects," Mitchell credits. "But as far as his philanthropies go, he does demand production. He likes to see that the project is carried out in a businesslike way."

The former astronaut finds nothing out of the ordinary in a self-made Midwestern millionaire, a perennial member of baseball's cabinet, supporting research into the mysteries of the human mind.

"We don't have to take a vow of poverty to be spiritual . . . And we find fellow travelers in all areas of human endeavor," says the onetime man on the moon.

FETZER DOESN'T TALK much about telekinesis, Buddhism or biofeedback — or holistic medicine, a mind-over-matter application of biofeedback technique that he also supports — in baseball circles. Not long ago, he declined a friend's invitation to speak about UFOs before a Kalamazoo service club.

But many of his unconventional beliefs are spelled out in *America's Agony*, a book he wrote and published through his foundation in 1971. In words that conjure up the images of Stanley Kubrick's 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, Fetzer at age seventy described the cosmos of outer space as the source of life and the whirling center of a divine intelligence. The physical man, wrote the radio engineer, is an electronic device made up of transistor-like cells, all vibrating with cosmic energy and tuned to receive the divine intelligence, which is a form of low-frequency radio wave. Elsewhere, the book reads like *The Power of Positive Thinking* with a cosmic twist: The conscious mind, he wrote, manufactures problems; if you think positively, your life can be a success.

The book contains a detailed chapter on meditation, a practice that Fetzer today follows occasionally — with typical practicality, when the problems of the business world need sorting out.

IT WAS A STRANGE sight: John Fetzer on his first recorded trip to the Tiger clubhouse, his conservative blue-gray suit dripping champagne and water from his dunking in the whirlpool. And Fetzer grabbed Mayo Smith, hugged the Tiger manager, and said to him, with jubilant emotion: "You may not only have won a pennant — you may have saved Detroit, too."

Just a year before, in the wake of one of the worst race riots in the nation's history, "good, gray John" had suffered a deep sense of failure as he watched frustrated fans looting the stadium when, at the season's last game, the Tigers lost, finishing just one game behind first-place Boston. Hours later, the old man was still

IN WORDS
that conjure up
Kubrick's 2001:
A Space
Odyssey, Fetzer
describes the
cosmos of outer
space.

alone in his office, writing a letter to himself. The letter was numb with pain and disappointment. It ends: "John Fetzer has just died. This is his ghost speaking."

It was seeing what the ball club meant to the riot-scarred city, both in the bitter defeat of '67 and the joyous victories of '68, that made Fetzer decide to stay in the city despite the offer of a new stadium in Pontiac. Fetzer declared at the start of negotiations over the stadium (he sold the aging structure to Detroit for one dollar in exchange for expensive renovations, paid for largely with a continuing ninety-cent surcharge on the price of a ticket) that the Tigers would remain in Detroit as long as he owned the club. Then he negotiated a thirty-year renewable lease, just in case he's not around that long.

"To me," Fetzer says soberly, "baseball is the fulfillment of an obligation of public interest." To him that means running the franchise in the black as long as he's in charge. And when he's gone, things may still remain more or less unchanged. There are persistent hints that the oldest Tiger has drawn up an unusual will, his final philanthropy. Most of his fortune, he discloses, will go to his research foundation. As for the ball club, some believe it will be left to the city of Detroit; others name general manager Campbell as the heir apparent. Campbell dismisses the latter suggestion, saying "That's not the way the world works — I couldn't afford the furniture around here." But in the same interview, his big blue Scotsman's eyes brimming with sincerity, he says, "Mr. Fetzer has been like a father to me."

Mr. Fetzer himself responds with an enigmatic smile. "I have plans," the

owner says simply. "I don't think the Tigers would even miss me. I think the operation would go right on without a ripple."

When Fetzer talks about the game, he talks about the beauty of a second baseman's movement, about the sure, slow-moving strategy that everyone in the stands can see and second-guess. And he talks about the fan, the blue-collar working stiff who remains the bread-and-butter of the major-league box office — and who can still afford to take the whole family to get sunburned in the bleachers.

"I think he takes pride in being able to touch the common man through baseball," Joe Falls suggests. "He has trouble touching the common man. I think he'd like to be a regular Joe, but he doesn't know how to be. I think he would like to go out and have a beer with you."

It may be the final irony that this man whom the fans never knew has made plans to ensure that they won't know it when he's gone.

JOHN FETZER CAN still see the limousines lined up outside St. Louis' Busch

Stadium in 1968, waiting to take the Cardinals' owner and his friends to the victory party that never came. He remembers Detroit's own mass celebration, and he tells it in the singsong pitches of a native epic: first, for dramatic tension, how the Tigers had been counted out of the series, how they were being called the worst representative of the American League had fielded in years. How Al Kaline, the Tiger's first-ballot Hall of Fame right fielder — the fellow who actually turned down a salary offer of \$100,000 because he thought he didn't deserve it — smacked two RBIs to turn the tide in that critical fifth game. How 50,000 people streaming over the fences onto the runway made it impossible for the team to land at Metro, and how a crowd of 5,000 greeted them at Willow Run a few minutes later. How the bus wound its way back from Ypsilanti on surface streets, avoiding the congested freeways, and how all of Detroit seemed to be out on the streets rejoicing, and how they would come up to the bus and bang on the windows and holler and yell for joy.

It sounds like a description of the Millennium, of paradise on earth, or at least of an enlightened society, but this was Detroit a year after the riots. This was the vision of this eighty-year-old Kalamazoo man who saw it from the window of the team bus carrying the triumphant Tigers back to Detroit:

"They were dancing, the blacks and the whites were dancing together, and there was no division. . . ."

Nancy Kool, a staff writer at the magazine, thinks they don't make them like Al Kaline anymore.